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# How To Prepare a Piano

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# How To Prepare a Piano

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## Abstract

*My original Piano Transplants (1969-72) were about relishing the shock of displacement: pianos planted in an English garden, sinking in a Texas cattle pond, pianos beached and aflame; observing their slow transformation through natural processing—the five year decay. My relationship with the piano did not end with the Piano Transplants, though. I will also discuss more recent works stemming from my fascination with the rich array of sounds which can be drawn from every part of the instrument once the keyboard is dethroned.*

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I studied piano in Christchurch, New Zealand. I studied piano in London.<sup>1</sup> Then I studied the piano itself, that complex piece of audio furniture. What could be done with it? Perhaps one could take Cage a step further and permanently prepare a piano. So in 1967, in London, I started messing about with an old upright: inserting little slivers of bamboo into the soundboard, which could be played like a vertical mbira and resonated the soundboard well; dangling a chianti bottle against the strings so that it swung across them in an irregular glissando; hooking up a toy train engine which ran up and down two bass strings; attaching a pair of doll's eyes with moveable eyelashes to the hammers of two high notes, so that they flirted when trilled. But the tour de force was something the English artist, John Lifton, made for me: a bubble blowing machine which produced streams of bubbles through a mouth carved in the side of the instrument whenever the soft pedal was used. There were certain restrictions: only one piece could be played on it, and that piece was the owner's choice; for me it was "Lili Marlene." When I moved to the States, composer Hugh Davies offered it a home, and he chose a Bach prelude.

Immolation came next. It was 1968 and we were burning American flags, political effigies, the status quo, so when the choreographer, Richard Alston and I started planning *Heat*, a dance work in which the performance space would be heated to the maximum tolerable temperature, and I was casting around for something sonorous to burn and record, it was no leap at all to decide on a piano. I discovered that defunct, discarded pianos were collected at the Wandsworth Borough trash dump. A festival planned for the Chelsea Embankment was willing to haul an old upright from the dump, and I had it over-tuned. Harvey Matusow had several old microphones he no longer needed, so we wrapped them in asbestos and with Hugh Davies' invaluable assistance, set them inside the piano, and ran the cables into a portable Uher tape recorder. I sprinkled some lighter fluid down in one corner and lit it—only a little fluid is used to start it off, because it is essential that the piano catch fire slowly, and watching the flames move about, catching here and there unpredictably, is mesmerising.

I had not expected that it would be so beautiful. At first a large crowd of onlookers talked their heads off, utterly defeating the taping, but then they fell silent, absorbed. It is a long process, over three hours. A piano's interior structure is beautiful and the fire reveals it gradually. The various kinds of varnish produce brilliant blues and greens, and snapping strings often sound very resonant. For the crowd at that first burning, this became an absorbing, meditative experience. At the end, with writer Alex Gross as the medium, we repaired to a tent and held a séance to arouse Beethoven and ask him to comment—which someone also taped, unbeknownst to me. After Alex had called "Ludi" several times, an electronic-sounding noise appeared on the tape (not audible to us in the tent, and not a malfunction signal we could recognise) and faded. That was my first Piano Transplant. Since then it has been repeated several times in England, the USA, New Zealand and now, so many years later, here in Perth (during the 2005 Festival). For something so pragmatic in origin, and so transitory, this persistence is surprising.



*Burning Piano* (Herne Hill, WA: 9 Oct 2005)  
photo K. Ford

In the early 1970s, Stanley Marsh III invited me to his cattle ranch in Amarillo, Texas, to make another Piano Transplant. To quote from Nicolas Slonimsky:

Not content with pianicide by fire, Lockwood instituted the practice of drowning pianos in December 27, 1972 on the Toad Hall ranch of Stanley Marsh III, the eccentric Texas millionaire. (He had the high honour of being included in Nixon's "enemies" list.)<sup>2</sup>

The ranch included a number of earthwork artists' projects. Robert Smithson died while working on his *Amarillo Ramp* there, the following year. The location, outside a small ranching town, was a nice incongruity, and on the ranch were a number of shallow stock ponds. I asked him to locate a defunct piano, but there were none to be had. People still cherished their family uprights, no matter in what condition. The worst which could be found was a white parlour piano with gilt ornamentation for \$100.

John Lifton came from Colorado to join us. We got a team of ranch workers to help, loaded the piano onto a pickup and early one morning, gently eased the instrument off the tailgate into a pond about a foot deep, with a clay bottom. A bottle of champagne launched it, everyone played it, and we left it to sink, very slowly, which it probably never did completely because the clay bed would be resistant—a long process of disintegration. Three years later Stanley told me that his family could still get some notes out of the piano, "matching their restricted repertoire nicely." This was the *Piano Drowning*, the next in the series of Piano Transplants.

Many piano destruction corridas were happening around that time: an upright was demolished in 4:51 minutes at Wayne State University, Detroit; seventeen pianos were smashed in one day by a group of firemen in Christchurch, England—whose best time was only 5:48 minutes, Slonimsky reports. Piano destruction became a craze. University students were dropping pianos from roofs, smashing them into pieces small enough to force through keyholes, and more. All of that seemed uninteresting to me, blunt, too fast in execution. It was not the destruction which fascinated me. I am interested in something less predictable, arising from the gradual action of natural forces—fire, water, wind, plants, earth—on an instrument designed for maximum control. I am interested in process.

Also at that time I built a *Piano Garden* consisting of two uprights and a small grand piano, in the garden of a lovely nineteenth century house, in Ingatestone, Essex. Evoking images of the Titanic sinking, I dug a sloping trench for one upright. The grand I set among laurel saplings and foxgloves, a thoroughly English country garden setting, and the third was half hidden in the trees. The juxtaposition of these highly designed artefacts with the plants and trees, growing freely and a little wild looking, pleases me even now. Both belonged in that country house, but the displacement was surreal. A plant appears pliable and fragile, and a piano, inflexible and strong, but neither is as it seems. The image of saplings growing through a keyboard was a process I wanted to watch.

The house was on a lane leading from the train station into the village, and the surprise and pleasure of this Transplant was that people passing along the lane often stopped in, trying out "Für Elise," or "Chopsticks," or a Beatles tune on the little grand, which was near the gate and remained playable for some time. It is like evaporation though. Notes drop out, the pedals detach, the music becomes its own ghost. When I left for America in 1973, my landlady had the pianos removed immediately, I am told, and returned that end of the grounds to its proper function. But I may revive the

Garden. My partner, the composer Ruth Anderson and I have a defunct baby grand, purchased for \$300 and worth every dollar, Ruth says. It cannot hold its tuning and is completely misleading as a composing tool, so we plan to move it out into the garden this spring.

If the Piano Transplants seem iconoclastic, then the instrument has taken a generous revenge. In 1995, Lois Svard, a fine American pianist, commissioned a piece from me, and sounded happy when I said I would want to work almost entirely inside the piano. I was familiar with Cage's preparations, having played some of those pieces many years earlier. Using those as a base, I went through my shelves of saved objects, applying bubble wrap, super-ball mallets I had made myself, irregularly shaped oval rocks from Greece, a convex based bowl gong, various balls, a broken pestle, a water glass and Cage's classic preparations: coins, screws and Romex cable sheathing. Unpredictability ruled. The smallest change in the angle of a hand to the strings, in pressure, or in the pianist's concentration changed the resultant sound spectrum. The whole piece rested on sonic detail, and being able to hear and relish it.

I give the player a set of tools and techniques for using them, with a score in the form of a series of phrases. The phrases are open ended. The player is asked to listen closely to the fine details of each sound she and the piano makes—and to explore further whenever a new variant emerges. I call this activity "ear walking," and the piece *Ear Walking Woman*. Lois realises it with fine sensitivity to the life of each sound, and recently released a DVD (on Innovera) demonstrating the preparations and performance.

Initially, like Cage, I notated exactly which detuned harmonics would result from placing dimes and screws under and between the strings of specific notes, at a specific distance from the pins, all carefully measured. This creates pitches with unusual combinations of partials, gong-like. In this way I set up a whole tone scale of such pitches for use in a phrase evoking Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*. I also found that my old piano produced complex sounds when those same strings were stroked with a super-ball mallet. And I learned that skill is needed to prevent the mallet from falling off the strings raised by the coin. I like it that something so freeing requires its own techniques. But what I did not realise was that this rich palette of partials was due to the strings having become oxidised, creating more friction, thus more complex vibrations. Also of course the double and triple string registers were much more out of tune than normal, something I had not taken into account because I love such de-tunings. Transferring the piece from my old clunker to Lois' perfectly tuned Steinway involved much tinkering with notation to obtain that whole tone scale, not to mention the effects of variations in strut positions. So unpredictability ruled beyond my expectations, to my pleasure. And thus after all, the piano, which I thought I had left behind me long ago in my search for new acoustic sound sources, seduced me back with its sonic range and beauty.



*Southern Exposure: Piano transplant number four* (Fremantle: 3-16 Oct 2005)  
photo Cat Hope

*Southern Exposure* (1982) was the final Piano Transplant, planned for *Sonorita Prospettiche*, an Italian exhibition documenting work impossible to realise. My instructions specified that a concert grand be set up on Sunset Beach on the California coast, near the Henry Cowell Redwoods Preserve, a site chosen in absentia from a map. It should be placed at the high tide line, and anchored firmly with a ship's anchor, lid raised, and left there to sea change, until it vanishes. I could not imagine anyone donating a grand for such a purpose. To my amusement some years later, when I visited the Henry

Cowell Preserve, it turned out to be named, not for our forefather, but for a local industrialist who had developed a lime pit there. Then some years later, I went to see Jane Campion's great film, *The Piano*, and found, of course, that Campion had done it for me, and on my favourite stretch of New Zealand coastline.

I still had a longing to make the installation myself, to see that profile against the ocean, so it was thrilling when Ross Bolleter located a ruined and beautiful little grand. Tos Mahoney and the staff of the 7<sup>th</sup> Totally Huge New Music Festival obtained permissions from the authorities at Fremantle, and the piano was installed on 3 Oct 2005, looking perfectly in proportion to the small Bathers' Beach in Fremantle. There is a coda however: on October 4<sup>th</sup>, it disappeared, completely. Tos sent out SOS in every direction to every conceivable authority, even offered a reward (but no immunity, said the police). Two days later, a backpacker called from a local hostel. Thinking it was abandoned, and beautiful, and "a fixer-upper," four backpackers had carried it by hand back to the hostel, installed it beneath the television, and set about oiling the body. They were just contemplating more intricate repairs when they heard about our SOS, and within a couple of hours it was back on the beach, where it survived until a storm, which blew in hard, dismembering the legs and the lid and half filling the body with sand and seaweed. Amazingly some notes still played. Ross recorded on it, then carefully carried it off to the farm where the pianos of his marvellous *Ruined Piano Labyrinth* have since been placed.



The piano from *Southern Exposure* being moved to Bolleter's *Ruined Piano Sanctuary* (Wambyn, WA: 2006)  
photo Tos Mahoney.

I would like to offer my warmest thanks to Tura New Music and to Ross for enabling this final Piano Transplant, and for the honour and the many pleasures of being a participant in the Festival and the conference.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lockwood and Perth composer Roger Smalley studied together at the RCM, London. – *Eds.*

<sup>2</sup> Nicolas Slonimsky, "Lectionary of Musical Information, Instruction, and Entertainment," *High Fidelity Magazine* (Jan. 1976), and *Lectionary of Music* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1989).